

## The Nexus between Iranian EFL Students' Big Five Personality Traits and Foreign Language Speaking Confidence

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### Abstract

This study sought to explore the extent to which Iranian EFL students' personality traits influence their foreign language speaking confidence in the classrooms. To do so, Big Five Inventory questionnaire developed by John et al. (1991) and foreign language speaking confidence questionnaire, based on MacIntyre et al. (1998) heuristic model, designed by Apple (2011) were applied to collect the data. 217 Iranian EFL learners were invited to participate in the study. Multiple regression analysis revealed that learners' foreign language speaking confidence is positively affected by their personality trait. Findings also indicated that favorable social conditions in the classrooms and classroom climate influenced learners' speaking confidence. Concerning the relationship between gender and foreign language speaking confidence, statistically significant association was found. Various educational implications and recommendations for further works were proposed.

**Key words:** Foreign language speaking confidence; willingness to communicate; perceptions of classroom climate; social conditions

### 1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that speaking confidence plays a significant role in an effective communication (Brown, 2003; Khan & Ali, 2010; McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2006; Shumin, 1997; Songsiri, 2007; Tam, 1997; Zaremba, 2006; Zhang, 2010). Moreover, it is broadly believed that one of the most important objectives of learning a second language for many L2 learners is its use (Hashimoto, 2002; Dörnyei, Clément & Noels, 2011; MacDonald, Clément & MacIntyre, 2003; Hadziosmanovic, 2012). Use of the target language is considered as a precursor of required conditions for successful second language acquisition (SLA) (Seliger, 1977; Swain 1995, 1998).

Anders (2002) maintains that language learning is influenced by both cognitive and affective domains of human behavior. One of the most significant affective domains which is supposed to influence students' language learning processes is speaking confidence (Apple, 2011, Bailey, 2005; Clément, Baker, & MacIntyre, 2003; Shumin, 1997; Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996; Osboe, Fujimura & Hirsche, 2007; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Kazuaki Shimizu, 2004). Speaking confidence is indeed affected by various individuals' characteristics. Among numerous individuals' properties that influence speaking confidence, personality traits arouse much more interest due to its significant impact on EFL learners' learning processes (Apple, 2011; MacIntyre, & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre, 1994; O'Connor, & Paunonen, 2007; Shimizu, 1999). It is conceptualized that speaking confidence is affected by learners' personality traits; however, there are not sufficient empirical evidences to substantiate this association. Consequently, this study sought to remedy a *gap* in the *current* literature by probing into the association between English learners' speaking confidence and personality traits.

### ***1.1. Foreign Language Speaking Confidence***

Self-confidence is seen as “the judgments and evaluations about one’s own value and worth” (Park & Lee, 2004, p 197). Accordingly, speaking confidence is conceptualized as learners’ appraisal about one’s own speaking ability and proficiency. Clement (1986) described L2 self-confidence as comprises of two affective and cognitive key constructs: 1) *language use anxiety* that refers particularly to the discomfort experienced when using an L2, and 2) *perceived L2 competence* which corresponds to self-evaluation of the target language skills (MacIntyre et. al. 1998:549). It is believed that perceived L2 confidence is fundamentally a judgment made by the learners about themselves and their perceived proficiency in the target language (Kill Molberg, 2010). If learners evaluate their own language skills as high, they will perceive themselves capable of communicating in the classroom and thus this perception will contribute to a high perceived L2 competence. Some empirical evidence confirmed the claim that there is a strong association between self-evaluation of language ability and language use anxiety, and this construct of L2 self-confidence plays a central role in learners’ development in the target language (MacIntyre et.al., 1997; MacIntyre and Gardner, 1989).

Foreign language speaking confidence includes six facets: 1) foreign language classroom speaking anxiety, 2) perceived foreign language speaking self-competence, 3) desire to speak English, 4) past English classroom experiences, 5) current English classroom perception, and 6) perceived social value of speaking English. These dimensions were conceptualized on the basis of one of the most comprehensive model in communication. In the following section the theoretical framework of foreign language speaking confidence has been defined comprehensively.

### ***1.2. Personality Trait***

The learner’s personality trait is another influential factor that helps describe how individuals interact with the members of their own cultural and social group as well as out-group members. Personality traits can be measure through different measurements. One of these measurements is Big Five Personality Traits that includes five dimensions: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness. A growing body of literature written in this field indicated an association between second language learning and the willingness to communicate in target language with personality traits (Apple, 2011; Lalonde, & Gardner, 1984; MacIntyre, & Charos, 1996; O’Connor & Paunonen, 2007; Shimizu, 1999). Regarding learners’ personality types, they may incline more or less to use L2 (Ehrman, 1990; Ehrman, & Oxford, 1990). Moreover, being aware of students’ personality types permits teachers to have a better understanding of the class activities and also enable them to determine the most effective techniques and strategies (Wilz, 2000). Scholars believe that an understanding of personality traits can help teachers describe why students approach class activity differently and why some of them achieve the goals while others fail (Oxford, & Ehrman, 1990; Wilz 2000).

Verhoeven and Vermeer (2002) investigated the association between the Big Five personality traits and communicative competence among native and non-native Dutch-speaking children. The findings indicated significant correlations were found between individuals’ Big Five traits such as conscientiousness and openness with different aspects of communicative competence. Moreover, it was theorized that personality trait has an indirect impact on L2 communication frequency through attitudes, motivation, language anxiety, and perceived competence MacIntyre et al., (1998).

It is also assumed that other individual differences will influence foreign language speaking confidence. Among the numerous individual differences, an attempt was made to see if age also plays a role in this connection. It is believed that while adults find it difficult to attain the ability to obtain and incorporate complex data and dealt with different aspects at the same time, children can do it automatically and unconsciously (Romero, 2006).

Another individual difference that is supposed to affect not only students' speaking confidence but also learning processes is gender (Clark & Trafford, 1995; Gorjian, Moosavian and Shahramiri, 2011; Hunter, Gambell, & Randhawa, 2005; Koosha, Ketabi and Kassaian, 2011; Powell, 1986; Pugsley, 1991). Concerning the relationship between the gender and foreign language speaking, Koosha, Ketabi and Kassaian, (2011) conducted a study the result of which showed that there was no statistically significant association between gender and foreign language speaking.

### ***1.3. Theoretical framework***

Learners' oral participation in classroom is one of the aspects of classroom interactions in which opportunities are established for learners to practice the L2 through their willingness to communicate. Learners need to be both able to communicate and also willing to communicate in the L2 (Dörnyei, 2001 and Kill Molberg, 2010). According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), willingness to communicate refers to "the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so" (p 547). A comprehensive and thorough WTC model, namely heuristic model, was proposed by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei and Noels in 1998. It comprised of six layers: a) social and individual context, b) affective-cognitive context, c) motivational propensities, d) situated antecedents, e) behavioral intention, and f) communication behavior. All layers will be discussed inclusively in the following paragraph.

Societal and individual context of communication is the base of the model. It contains an interaction between society and the individual and provides the opportunities for both learning and using L2 (Clément, 1980). Affective-cognitive context entails intergroup attitudes, social situation, and communicative competence. A positive attitude toward learning the second language, a good previous communicative experience and high L2 communicative competence make an individual more willing to communicate and such consequently more learning in learners (MacDonald, Clément and MacIntyre, 2003). Motivational propensities encompass interpersonal motivation (learner's relationship to L2 and the people who speak it), intergroup motivation (attitudes and relations between individuals), and second language self-confidence (communicative competence along with experience). Antecedents of communication comprise of a desire to communicate with a specific person (affected by the motives of affiliation) and state communicative self-confidence (concerning the level of self-confidence and anxiety at different situation). The last two layers in the heuristic model are willingness to communicate and L2 use. The former is conceptualized as having a direct influence on L2 use. In terms of actual communication, a learner will select to speak or not based on the interaction of the previously aforementioned variables. Regarding the aforementioned discussions, it seems that foreign language speaking confidence is established on one of the most inclusive model in communication which considered different aspects of speaking confidence extensively. Generally, it is assumed that by applying this model, oral interaction in the target language will be fostered and thus language learning will be enhanced.

### ***1.4. Research questions***

The research questions underpinning this study are:

- 1) Is there any statistically significant relationship between EFL learners' personality traits and foreign language speaking confidence with regard to their various sub-scales?
- 2) Do the Iranian EFL learners differ in their foreign language speaking confidence in relation to gender and age?

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1. Participants***

227 EFL learners, including 119 females and 108 males, took part in this study. They were drawn from several language institutes in Mazandaran and Ilam provinces in Iran. Participants' age

ranged from 16 to 30. To more fully understand the population of interest, Table 1 provides some basic demographic information.

**Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants**

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	108	47.6
	Female	119	52.4
Age	16 – 20	91	40.1
	21 – 25	82	36.1
	26 - 30	54	23.8

As it is obvious in above Table, most (40.1%) of participants' age range was between 16 and 20. Table 1 is also indicated that the number of females was more than males. It is important to note that participation was voluntary and answers were anonymous.

## **2.2. Measures**

Our main data collection strategy involved the use of two questionnaires.

**2.2.1. Foreign Language Speaking Confidence Scale (FLSC):** Students' foreign language speaking confidence questionnaire has been designed by Apple (2011). The mentioned questionnaire was modified in terms of our learners' social and cultural situation. It is composed of six dimensions: foreign language classroom speaking anxiety (FLCSA), perceived foreign language speaking self-competence (PFLSF), desire to speak English (DSE), past English classroom experiences (PECE), current English classroom perception (CECP), and perceived social value of speaking English (PCVSE). The 52 items on the *FLSC* are scored on a 5-point Likert scale format with labels from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

**2.2.2. Big Five Inventory Scale (BFI):** The BFI scale (John et al. 1991) was designed to measure learners' personality traits. Items of the scale have been constructed to represent five areas of personality traits namely: Agreeable, conscientiousness, extroversion, neuroticism, openness. BFI consisted of 44 items, on a 5-point Likert scale with labels from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

## **2.3. Data analysis**

To answer the questions mentioned earlier, the collected data were put into the Statistical Software for Social Sciences (SPSS.20). The multiple regressions were employed to answer the questions and an independent T-Test was applied to estimate the relationship between learners' age, gender and foreign language speaking confidence.

## **2.4. Procedure**

The present study was conducted in spring 2013. The questionnaire was piloted on 35 volunteers and adjustments made to statements that were unclear. Accordingly, the modified questionnaires were distributed among the main participants of the study. In general, it took more than one month to collect all the questionnaires.

## **3. Results**

In order to respond the questions posed in the study, a number of statistical procedures were run. In what follows, first, the descriptive statistics about the measures of the study are presented followed by spearman correlation, multiple regressions and chi-square analysis.

Table 2 provides means, standard deviations, and standardized coefficient alphas of the measures applied in current study. The internal consistency reliability estimates for subscales used in this

study were found acceptable, with standardized coefficient alphas ranging from .68 to .98. As it is shown in the following table, all coefficient alphas are acceptable.

**Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and standardized coefficient alphas**

Measure	N	M	SD	Std. Coefficient Alpha
<i>Speaking confidence</i>	227	146.36	61.582	.892
FLCSA	227	32.08	14.588	.879
PFLSF	227	22.12	9.391	.913
DSE	227	25.68	11.474	.932
PECE	227	21.70	9.884	.924
CECP	227	22.43	10.176	.928
PCVSE	227	22.34	10.773	.942
<i>Big Five Personality</i>	227	118.51	49.180	.982
Agreeable	227	24.88	10.384	.914
Conscientiousness	227	25.07	10.892	.920
Extroversion	227	21.86	9.380	.904
Neuroticism	227	22.25	9.816	.910
Openness	227	24.45	10.266	.918

Note. FLCSA= foreign language classroom speaking anxiety; PFLSF= perceived foreign language speaking self-competence; DSE= desire to speak English; PECE= past English classroom experiences; CECP= current English classroom perception; PCVSE= perceived social value of speaking English.

As it is obvious in Table 3, various correlation coefficients of the measures applied in this study are reported. The correlation table represents a significant positive relationship ( $r=.886$ ) between the *Speaking Confidence* and Big five personality traits. The highest positive correlation is associated to extroversion ( $r=.878$ ) followed by openness ( $r=.871$ ), conscientiousness ( $r=.853$ ) and agreeable ( $r=.841$ ) and a strong negative relationship with neuroticism ( $r=-.864$ ). Strong internal positive relationships were observed between sub-scales of *Speaking Confidence* and Big five personality traits.

**Table 3. Spearman correlations between big five personality traits and foreign language speaking confidence**

	BFPT	Extroversion	Openness	Neuroticism	Conscientiousness	Agreeable
FLSC	.886**	.878**	.871**	-.864**	.853**	.841**

Note. FLSC= Foreign Language Speaking confidence; BFPT= Big Five Personality Trait

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The findings of the correlational analyses discussed before indicate various bivariate relationships between measures of the study. However, bivariate analyses could not show the effect of one measure on another. Multiple regression analyses provide better evidences. In other words, they predict which independent measure predicts a dependent subscale. The findings illustrated in Table 4, not only report the coefficients from the regression models, but also reveal their levels of significance.

As it is clearly shown in Table 4, among these five measures, *Extroversion* was the most powerful predictor of the students' Foreign Language Speaking Confidence ( $B=1.605$ ,  $t=2.385$ ,  $\text{sig}=.018$ ) followed by *Neuroticism* measure ( $B=1.423$ ,  $t=3.437$ ,  $\text{Sig}=.001$ ); *Openness* ( $B=.411$ ,

$t=2.314$ ,  $Sig=.021$ ), *Conscientiousness* ( $B=.377$ ,  $t=2.488$ ,  $Sig=.014$ ) and *Agreeable* ( $B=.255$ ,  $t=2.483$ ,  $Sig=.016$ ). As revealed by their  $\beta$  and  $t$  values, all measures were positive predictors.

**Table 4. Multiple regression analyses for predicting Foreign Language Speaking Confidence**

Foreign Language Speaking Confidence			
Measures	B	t	Sig
Constant	-.021	3.051	.003
Extroversion	1.605	2.385	.018
Neuroticism	1.423	3.437	.001
Openness	.411	2.314	.021
Conscientiousness	.377	3.670	.000
Agreeable	.255	2.483	.016
F = 168.416	Sig = 0.001		
R = 0.890	$R^2 = 0.792$		

To investigate the relationship between gender with foreign language speaking confidence, Chi-square was applied. As seen in Table 5, the observed chi-square ( $X^2 = 7.877$ ) is significant ( $sig = 0.001$ ). Moreover, it was found that females' speaking confidence was more than their counterparts.

**Table 5. Chi-square Values of Comparing gender regarding their Foreign Language Speaking Confidence**

		Speaking Confidence Score					Total
		90 -113	114-137	138-160	160-183	183-206	
Female	Count	37	43	24	13	2	119
	% of Total	16.3%	18.9%	10.6%	5.7%	0.9%	52.4%
Male	Count	39	58	7	4	0	108
	% of Total	17.2%	25.6%	3.1%	1.8%	0.0%	47.6%
Total	Count	76	101	31	17	2	227
	% of Total	33.5%	44.5%	13.7%	7.5%	0.9%	100.0%
Chi – square = 17.877		d.f=4				sig= 0.001	

To detect the relationship between learners' age and their speaking confidence, spearman correlation coefficient was run. As it is obvious, the observed relationship (0.320) is significant (0.000).

**Table 6. Spearman correlation of learners' age and their speaking confidence**

		Spearman's Correlation Coefficient	N	Sig
Age	Speaking Confidence	0.320	227	.000

#### 4. Discussion

The present study contributes to a better understanding of the predictors of foreign language speaking confidence by unraveling the influence of the Big Five personality traits. The results of the first research question put forward that there is a strong direct correlation ( $r=.886$ ) between Iranian EFL learners' foreign language speaking confidence and Big Five personality trait. It is interesting to note that *extroversion* has the highest direct relationship ( $r=.878$ ) with FLSC and negative relationship with speaking anxiety. One possible explanation is that the extroverted learners prefer to engage more in social activities and tasks in the classroom, thus this preference helps them improve



their level of speaking confidence and lowers their speaking anxiety. This finding is in parallel with the finding of MacIntyre, & Charos (1996) in which extroversion has direct impact on speaking anxiety.

*Openness* which is often characterized by learners' studiousness and innovative and creative performance (Diseth, 2003) and also is described a person who has a variety of experience has the second highest correlation ( $r=.871$ ) with speaking confidence. It can be inferred from this correlation that learners with high level of openness and previous experiences from their English classrooms have more speaking self-competency which will lead to higher speaking confidence (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; Apple, 2011).

There is also a significant correlation ( $r=-.864$ ) between *Neuroticism* FLSC. It was theorized that neuroticism which is characterized by learners' emotional state such as anxiousness and nervousness will negatively influence their speaking confidence as neurotic learners avoid engaging and participating in classroom activities or tasks. The results confirmed this theory and showed that lower the neuroticism contributes to higher speaking confidence in the classroom. This result provided parallel evidence with the study carried out by Apple (2011) who found out that neuroticism affect foreign language speaking confidence moderately.

*Conscientiousness* which refers to learners' awareness to the social context both inside and outside of the classroom and also to their future goals has a strong correlation ( $r=.853$ ) with speaking confidence. Furthermore, conscientiousness is expanded and theorized on the basis that organized and disciplined learners who employed good study habits achieve better results in English classes due to better preparedness (Apple, 2011). This finding is in agreement with the finding of Apple (2011) in which conscientiousness has strong indirect impact on foreign language speaking.

The last personality trait is *agreeableness* which is strongly correlated with speaking confidence ( $r=.841$ ). Learners with high level of agreeableness are more inclined to cooperate and sympathize with others (John, Neumann, & Soto, 2008). Accordingly, it can be inferred from this inclination that learners tend more to be integrated to the target language and use it which will refer to their desire to speak and consequently, will contribute to higher speaking confidence. As discussed above, the results indicated that high level of extroversion, openness, neuroticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness in English learners will improve the higher level of foreign language speaking confidence.

To test the prediction of foreign language speaking confidence, multiple regressions were run. The findings revealed that Big Five personality trait is a strong predictor of ( $R = 0.890$ ,  $R^2 = 0.792$  and  $Sig = 0.001$ ) FLSC. Extroversion has the highest prediction followed by openness, neuroticism, conscientiousness and agreeableness.

Although the current research was not planned to indicate the intra-links between foreign language speaking confidence and big five personality trait sub-scales, results, in retrospect, provided strong correlations between each set of sub-scales. Such findings recommended that factors containing each scale evaluate a common concept and the instruments used in this study measure what they're designed to measure. It is also interesting to note that the subscales of foreign language speaking confidence and big five personality trait, as provided by Table 3, were strongly correlated with each other.

The second research question sought to determine whether or not there was a nexus between learners' age and gender and their speaking confidence (see Table 5 and 6). The findings of the current study revealed that English learners differ significantly in some of their FLSC regarding to their age and gender. Female learners indicated more speaking confidence than their counter parts. It can be due to some factors such as different teachers and accordingly different teaching methodologies

and/or individual and emotional differences. Moreover, it is generally perceived that females are better speaker and employed oral proficiency skills in comparisons to their counterparts.

Concerning to the age, the result showed that there is a significant relationship between English learners age and their speaking confidence. As Table 6 provides, older learners outperform their counterparts. One possible explanation could be due to learners' previous experiences, more general information, and more language proficiency which will help the older learners to be more self-competent and contribute to lower anxiety in the classrooms. Consequently, it enhances learners desire to speak which indeed will enhance learners' language in use and thus their speaking confidence. The current result supports the findings of Koosha, Ketabi and Kassaian (2011) in which they showed in their study that speaking skill is affected by the age of learners.

### 5. Conclusion and implication

Regarding to above mentioned results, it is essential for educational practitioners to be aware the strong impact of some personality trait not only on EFL learners' speaking confidence but also in educational setting as they enhance learners' academic achievement. The present results also suggest that engaging in social activity (extroversion), learners' hardworking and previous experience (openness), being organized and having goals (conscientiousness) and attempting to integrate and use the target language (agreeableness) have a positive impact on FLSC and being anxious and nervous (neuroticism) will influence FLSC negatively. Moreover, teachers as manager should pay attention to the learning context in the classroom, students desire to speak or their motivation, learners self-competence and learners previous experiences. As anxiety is the outcomes of lower desire to speak and self-competence, teachers by establishing an appropriate and supportive atmosphere in the classroom motivate the learners more and improve their performance.

Although the current study makes a notable contribution, it is necessary to consider some limitations existing in the paper which further researchers could address. First, the results of the present study may not be overtly generalized due to number of participants and provinces. Moreover, due to cultural situation and special learning contexts, the findings might not be generalizable to non-Iranian samples. Further research can be carried out to investigate other influential factors such emotional intelligence and strategy use in English learners' speaking confidence.

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